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REFLECTIONS

On an Unsolved Mystery

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On Sunday morning, May 10, 1948, a Greek fisherman named Antonaros came upon a body floating about 150 yards offshore in Salonika Bay. He pulled it into his fishing boat and made for the shore, where police quickly identified it as that of George Polk, a well-known American correspondent working for the Columbia Broadcasting System.

Polk had been missing for eight days when his body was found. His hands and feet were bound with rope, he was blindfolded, and he had been shot at close range in the back of the head. The coroner estimated that the body had been in the water for seven days.

Twenty-nine years have now passed since George Polk's death. The case was intensively investigated by correspondents headed by Walter Lippmann was set up to look into the tragedy. William J. Donovan, wartime head of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), was hired as counsel to the committee and went to Greece for an on-the-spot investigation. Two other correspondents' committees also attempted to investigate the case.

The Greek government offered a cash reward immediately after the body was found and ultimately arrested and convicted a Greek newspaperman, Gregory Staktopoulis, for murdering Polk. Staktopoulis, identified as a leftist with communist connections who had been working for the British Reuters News Agency, at first steadfastly denied complicity. Later, the police made public a whole series of "confessions" in which the Greek newsman admitted participating in a plot to do away with George Polk.

Donovan's inquiry into the case foundered inconclusively. A Greek-speaking U.S. Air Force officer whom he had obtained as his chief aide was recalled to Washington — perhaps because the Donovan inquiry was embarrassing Greek right-wing forces. In any event, none of the unofficial inquiries produced a solution to the mystery. The U.S. Embassy in Athens resolutely insisted that the murder was carried out by communists or other leftists, and this was the conclusion proclaimed by the Greek government.

Today, almost three decades after Polk's murder, the verdict still remains open. Staktopoulos, long since released after serving a twelve-year prison term, repudiated his numerous confessions, insisting that they had been extracted by intimidation. Greek journalists have conducted extensive investigations into the case over the years. None of these has been given more than cursory attention in the American press.

What makes the torpidity with which the U.S. press regards the Polk mystery peculiar is the fact that Polk has been anointed as a sort of saint of the tradition of American investigative reporting. A series of awards for journalistic endeavor named for Polk was set up by Long Island University within a month of Polk's death, and the Overseas Press Club in New York makes an annual award in Polk's name for journalistic enterprise involving genuine personal risk and bravery.

Yet when it comes to throwing its investigatory resources into establishing, if possible, the full facts of the Polk tragedy, the American press had made no real move since the period immediately after his body was found.

Polk's death occurred at a time of great political turmoil in Greece. The Left and Right were fiercely and violently competing for power. The Right was in charge, but the struggle of the Left was by no means over. Markos Vafiades, the communist guerrilla leader, still held out in the mountains on the Yugoslav-Greek frontier, and shortly after Polk's death he was interviewed in a major exclusive by Homer Bigart of *The New York Herald-Tribune*. All the American correspondents in Greece were in constant and shadowy contact with underground "informants" of both the Right and the Left who often played double and triple roles. British, American, Russian, and French agents were active in an atmosphere of deep intrigue and double-dealing.

From the beginning, the American correspondents

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